

## Isaiah 61:1-2a

Christmas is eight days from now. For many this is joyous news. For some it is reason to panic. *The house is not ready for guests. The presents are not only needing to be wrapped; they are still in the store needing to be purchased. Cookies need to be baked. Decorations still have to be hung. Eight days? You've got to be kidding me. I'm not even close to being ready!*

And yet those who are ready, and those who are not, both have calendars. We all know the exact date when Christmas will arrive. There is no guesswork involved here. Everyone, therefore, should be ready. There really is no excuse. If someone is unprepared, they simply did not plan properly.

Now what if Congress passed a law declaring that Christmas Day is not to be a fixed day on the calendar, not December 25, but will vary from year to year at random. A select committee will announce at 6:00 in the morning that it is Christmas Day with no prior warning being given whatsoever. How, in that case, would anyone be ready? Calendars would be useless. I think that most all of us would panic upon hearing at 6:00 in the morning, "Today is Christmas Day! Merry Christmas!" Merry? Hardly. More like Scary Christmas! Nothing is prepared.

Well obviously this is a law that will never be passed. It's pure imagination to consider such a thing. But the following story is not imagination. It actually did happen some years ago. A tourist traveling in Switzerland discovered a beautiful estate which was quite secluded on the shore of a tranquil lake. On the estate was a garden that was simply spectacular. He met an aged caretaker. This custodian seemed glad to see the traveler and was eager to show him around the estate and its lush garden. "How long have you been here?" asked the tourist. "A very long time," the caretaker replied. "And does your master spend much time here?" "No, he has been here four times in all these years." "When was he here last?" "Over ten years ago. I am almost always alone. It's very seldom that anyone, even a stranger, stops by." "And yet you have the entire estate in such perfect order," said the traveler, "and everything in the garden is flourishing as if you were expecting him sometime this week." "No sir," exclaimed the caretaker emphatically, "I have it fixed as if he were coming today!"

As Christians we get it. We understand the parallel between this caretaker's preparedness and our own. And I'm not speaking of being prepared for Christmas Day. Even those of us who are not ready for December 25 now will be ready when it arrives in eight days. The preparedness we have as Christians is being ready for Jesus to come today; not even sometime this week, but this very day. There need be no panic among us. Go ahead and panic that Christmas is coming, but rejoice and give thanks that Jesus could come this very day.

Isaiah's words in our Old Testament reading tell us why. "*The Spirit of the Lord...has anointed Me to bring good news to the poor...to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*"

These words speak of Jesus. He is God's anointed One. He came on Christmas Day to perform all these wonderful works Isaiah speaks of. Read the Gospels and see Jesus bringing good news to the poor, binding up the brokenhearted, and proclaiming liberty to the captives. When Jesus walked from town to town, the people rejoiced. Those who were sick and troubled, sorrowful and grieving, came running to

Him. And He bestowed mercy on all of them. And today is no different. Jesus is working today in the same way as before. And so we, too, can come running to Him when He comes to us today.

And yet we hesitate, don't we? We struggle with applying the good news of Jesus to ourselves. We hear of the grace that is ours in our baptism; we see the Sacrament on the altar prepared for us and our salvation. It's Jesus coming to us! But it all seems too good, too wonderful to be true. We act like children who are afraid that when Santa comes, all they will get is a lump of coal in their stocking. Maybe it's because we know it's what we deserve, to be thrown in with the lumps of burning coal forever, because we belong not on the nice list, but on the list that is naughty.

Yet this is why God gives us these words in Isaiah. Yes, we deserve the worst from God. And to confess this truth is to repent. It is to be, as Isaiah writes, *the one who is poor, and brokenhearted, and the one who is a captive*. And to people who are these things such good news is given. Jesus does not come to punish. He comes to forgive. He has no naughty list based on how you have behaved. But every name on His list is declared forgiven. And your name is there, dear baptized sinner, for Christ died for everyone, every sinner, and this includes you.

So yes, your sins have bound you up. You and I have been captive to our naughtiness, our wretchedness. Yes, you and I are poor, miserable sinners. And not only has this broken our hearts; we broke God's heart because of how we have lived. But this is why Jesus comes. To put God's heart right again, and to bind up yours and mine. To die your death, and thus to rescue you from death. To suffer what your sins deserve.

And listen to this, He comes, writes Isaiah, to proclaim the *year of the Lord's favor*. A year of joy and of jubilee; a year of rescue and redemption. Every gift God is giving you here today is because His favor rests upon you. Through His Word and His Sacraments Jesus bestows heaven itself to you. And this is not tied to whether you have been good or bad. God's favor rests on you for the sake of Jesus.

In our benediction at the close of the Divine Service, you will be given the words, "*The Lord bless you and keep you,*" and these words conclude with, "*The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace.*" To which you say, "*Amen.*" *Yes, it is so!* This is not a wish. This is a declaration. God looks upon you with favor not because of anything in you, but because Jesus took your sins to His cross. God's forgiveness, His smiling face, His peace, His favor, are yours in Christ.

If this is how God sees you now, there is no need to panic regarding His coming at the end; even if that coming is today. Think of this...Christmas Day is a day of joy, isn't it? A day of giving. What child has not said, "I wish every day was Christmas!" Children do not panic regarding the coming of Christmas. They want it to come now..today. As with Christmas, so with Jesus' coming at the last. That day will be the greatest Christmas Day since He came in a manger. For He will come to give you that which is yours right now in your baptism - a place in heaven with Him. What joy! And so we can be, and we are, children who wish that every day could be that final, great Christmas Day.

Your presence here today is no accident. Jesus is preparing you for that day. He comes forgiving you now. He comes releasing you from what holds you captive now. He comes with favor now. So whether you are ready for December 25 or not, you are ready today for Jesus to come. Amen.